



THE PEARL RING

MARY E. BRADLEY



Class PZ7

Book B725 Pe

Copyright N^o

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

THE PEARL RING



“‘It looks more like a ring,’ said Mrs. Redfield.”

The Pearl Ring

BY

MARY E. BRADLEY

With Illustrations by

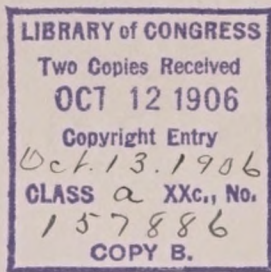
A. C. WILLIAMSON



PHILADELPHIA

HENRY ALTEMUS COMPANY

p27
B725Pe



Copyright, 1906, by Henry Altemus

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

	Page
The Two Gifts	13

CHAPTER II

The Two Replies	25
---------------------------	----

CHAPTER III

Martha Has a Visitor	39
--------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV

The Reading Club	49
----------------------------	----

CHAPTER V

The Doubtful Member	61
-------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VI

Suspensions	77
-----------------------	----

CHAPTER VII

In a Strange House	93
------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VIII

Thanksgiving Day	105
----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER IX

A Good Investment	117
-----------------------------	-----

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
" 'It looks more like a ring,' said Mrs. Redfield," Frontispiece	
" 'But it can't be true!'"	15
" 'Made of plum-colored silk'"	19
" 'I can't exactly wear it,' Mary answered"	31
" 'You are the person I was wishing for!'"	41
" 'May I sit on the hassock at your feet?'"	43
" 'Miss Mildred was at the blackboard'"	53
" 'That old frock is horrid'"	57
" 'The maid came in with another tray'"	65
" 'Naturally this made a commotion'"	67
" 'She dropped her head on the desk'"	85
" 'Will anybody want me?'"	88
" 'She was perfectly amazed'"	99
" 'The table was bright with chrysanthemums'"	111
" 'Martha began again with a red cheek'"	119
" 'Send me to a dungeon-cell, Martha'"	121
" 'It was she that lost it,' sobbed Milly"	123

THE TWO GIFTS

The Pearl Ring

CHAPTER I

THE TWO GIFTS

COUSIN JANE was an elderly lady who had never married, and who had outlived all her near relatives. A few cousins, some young and some old, some poor and some well-to-do, were all her kinsfolk; and, having more money than she chose to spend for herself, she was generous to these cousins on birthdays and holidays.

One Christmas-time she was putting up a number of parcels to be sent by express to a number of people. Through an interruption, which caused some confusion in her arrangements and some hurry in their completion, two of the packages were misdirected; the one

THE PEARL RING

intended for a certain Miss Martha Redfield being carefully addressed to Miss Mary Rutherford, while Mary's parcel was as plainly marked with Martha's name. In her haste, and in the darkness of the waning afternoon, Cousin Jane had also quite unconsciously exchanged her presentation cards, so that the message meant for Martha went into the box meant for Mary; and vice versa.

In due time each parcel was delivered according to its direction, if not according to intention; and when Martha Redfield, a bright-eyed girl of fifteen, opened hers, she beheld a charming box decorated with painted flowers and bows of satin ribbon.

"A box of candy!" she exclaimed, in a tone of surprise.

"Is that all?" asked her mother, in a tone of disappointment. "Well, dear," she added more cheerfully, "you don't often have a present of candy. It will be a treat for you."

"Of course it will," said Martha.

THE PEARL RING

Still, in each face was a wondering and unsatisfied expression.

"I don't know what I expected," Martha remarked presently, with a half-laugh. "And Cousin Jane is so good to us that I ought to be pleased with anything she sends. But—somehow—"

"It seems as if, when she was spending so much as this thing must have cost," added Mrs. Redfield, "she might better have sent you something useful."

"Well, I don't know."

Martha turned about, with a sudden change of tone:

"I'm not sure but I like this better, after all. Cousin Jane always has sent useful things, because she knew we needed them. But just for once to be treated as if she did n't know



THE PEARL RING

we needed them!—as if we had as good a right to eat real good candy as her rich cousins—eh, mother?”

“If you look at it that way—! But a beaver muff would keep your hands warmer.”

“Never mind! We ’ve got the candy, and I ’m going to sample it right away. Which will you have—buttercups or violets? Here’s all kinds,” cried Martha, defying her plurals recklessly. “Nut-caramels—heavenly! And nougats, and fig-paste—real lumps of delight! Help yourself, mother! It’s no use denying that a box of candy is exciting,” she rattled on. “Did I ever have one before? Oh, what is this, I wonder?” as she spied a tiny box wedged between two candied apricots. “What do you think it is, mother? ‘Something nice for Betsy Price’? But, somehow,”—her eyes shining with a new excitement,—“it doesn’t look—exactly—like a sugar-plum.”

“It looks much more like a ring,” said Mrs. Redfield.

THE PEARL RING

"And so it is. Why, mother!"

Martha's eyes grew round as moons, for the lid of the little satin-lined case had sprung open and a lovely single pearl, set on a slim gold hoop, revealed itself.

"A pearl ring!" exclaimed Mrs. Redfield, equally excited. "Well, that is a surprise!"

Martha clasped her hands and rolled up her eyes like a tragedy queen. "The desire of my heart, the dream of my life!" she cried. "But it can't be true. I'm asleep in the middle of a fairy-tale. I shall wake up in the moonlight with a cold in my head, and the pearl will be a popcorn; I'm sure of it."

"Don't be silly," said her mother. "If it's a fairy-tale, Cousin Jane is the fairy—as usual. Here's her card."

She had found a slip of pasteboard with Cousin Jane's name on one side, and on the other, in her prim, old-fashioned writing:

"Merry Christmas to my dear cousin, with

THE PEARL RING

the hope that this little gift will prove useful and ornamental."

The package addressed to Miss Mary Rutherford was left at a very different-looking place from the plain little home of the Redfields. It was a delightful old red-brick house set in the midst of vines and shrubbery, and its big, sunny parlor, full of books and pictures and flowers and singing-birds and easy-chairs, was equally unlike the Redfield sitting-room, with its faded carpet and well-worn furniture. The mother and daughter were different also. Mary Rutherford was only a year older than Martha, but she was taller and prettier and better dressed, and looked like a young lady, while Martha looked like a schoolgirl. She had soft, white hands that had never been roughened by work, and sweet, graceful manners that made you certain she had always been shielded from disagreeable things. In fact, she looked like one

THE PEARL RING

of the lilies that toil not, neither do they spin. And her mother had the same air of gentle refinement.

"What has Cousin Jane sent you, my dear?" as the parcel was opened. "Something pretty, of course."

"Ye-s," was the daughter's rather hesitating answer. "Pretty enough, I suppose. It seems to be a sort of work-bag."

Mrs. Rutherford raised her eyebrows.

"A work-bag? How curious! Let me see it."



Mary handed it to her mother, and they inspected it together. It was quite large, and made of plum-colored silk with a sky-blue lining and satin drawing-strings. A circle of little pockets were each ornamented with a

THE PEARL RING

motto embroidered in blue floss, and inside were a number of working-implements—scissors, thimble-case, emery-cushion, and darning—all handsomely mounted in silver. The pockets were filled with papers of needles and spools of silk and thread. It was a completely furnished work-bag, in short, and thoroughly satisfactory—as a work-bag. But as a present it seemed to be a failure.

Mrs. Rutherford looked curiously at the mottoes on the pockets.

“They seem to be very nicely worked,” she said. “But I can’t quite make them out. Can you?”

“Oh, yes, mama. One of them is, ‘Never too late to mend.’”

“Very appropriate, I ’m sure.”

“But rather pointed, don’t you think, mama? Another is, ‘A stitch in time saves nine.’ Does Cousin Jane think that I go in rags and tags, do you suppose?”

“Oh, it is only a decoration,” said her

THE PEARL RING

mother. "It is the fashion nowadays to revive old-fashioned things."

"Here is one from the Bible," continued Mary. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.' And here is another, from Proverbs, isn't it? 'She worketh willingly with her hands.' It is a bagful of good advice. I dare say I needed it."

"Did Cousin Jane's card come with it?" asked Mrs. Rutherford. "Perhaps she did not send it, after all. It would be much more like Grandmother Darrow."

"Oh, no! Dear old Grandmother Darrow sent me a bead reticule—don't you remember? And here 's the card besides: 'Kindest love to my dear cousin, and wishing she may always possess the pearl of great price.' What has the pearl of great price got to do with a silk work-bag, mama?"

"I'm sure I don't know! Unless she thinks that King Lemuel's is the only pattern for a perfect woman."

THE PEARL RING

"It is not quite clear, even so," returned Mary. "But it is a handsome bag, at all events."

She took it quietly to her room, and no more was said about it. But in her heart she was mortified and disappointed. Cousin Jane's gifts to her, hitherto, had always seemed to confer, and imply, a sort of distinction. Her choicest books, the Parian statuettes on her mantel, the fine engravings that decorated her own room, the Florentine mosaics that were her prettiest ornaments—all these were tokens of Cousin Jane's good taste and tributes to her appreciation of it. She had never sent her anything commonplace before; and far from expecting it on this occasion, Mary had dreamed of something still more significant. It was only a word of Cousin Jane's, a smiling allusion to her pretty hands, that gave her the idea. "But I thought," said Mary, as her pretty hands hung up the bag—"I did think she meant to send me a pearl ring!"

THE TWO REPLIES

THE PEARL RING

CHAPTER II

THE TWO REPLIES

IN due time Cousin Jane, who had never suspected her mistake, received two letters of acknowledgment. The first, from Martha, was overflowing with gratitude:

“How can I thank you enough, you dear, dear Cousin Jane, for your beautiful gift? Ornamental? I never had anything so ornamental before! And useful, too, in a way that I feel better than I can express. How came you to guess at the wish of my heart? It ’s like a lovely dream come true. Thank you a thousand times, dear Cousin Jane, for your constant kindness to

“Your grateful, affectionate

“Martha.”

THE PEARL RING

The one from Mary Rutherford was cooler in its tone:

"Dear Cousin Jane: Thank you very much for your kind gift. I hope it will help me to find 'pearls of great price'—more than one of them, perhaps. I am ashamed to own that I have not been a diligent seeker after such treasure. But 'it is never too late to mend,' and some day I hope you will see that your suggestions have taken effect. With best love from mama and my brothers,

"Your always affectionate cousin,
"Mary Rutherford."

These letters were rather puzzling to Cousin Jane. She read Mary's twice over, and laid it down with a sigh.

"I must say it is hardly what I expected from her," she soliloquized. "But poor little Martha is pleased, at any rate. She seems more delighted with her work-bag than Mary with her pearl ring. I took pains with that

THE PEARL RING

ring, too. It's a very fine pearl, whether she knows it or not. She never even mentions the candy, either, though I thought most girls were pleased with good candy in fancy boxes. Hopes I will see that my suggestions have taken effect—what does she mean by that, I wonder? I think I'll have to write and ask her."

But Cousin Jane was not given to letter-writing, except on business. She had considerable correspondence of that sort and many other ways of using her time; so she never wrote to Mary, after all. Some months later, however, she had occasion to visit the distant city where the Rutherfords lived; and after settling her business affairs, she went to spend the night with her cousins.

It was always pleasant to visit them; for she liked the atmosphere of the house. Mrs. Rutherford was a very gracious lady, gentle and kindly; her sons were well-bred, intelligent young men; and Mary, who had been a

THE PEARL RING

lovely child always, seemed to her now quite the ideal young girl, pure and fair as a lily, without and within. Secretly, Cousin Jane had always been a little sentimental about Mary Rutherford. She never said so to any one; but in her heart she loved her best of all the cousins.

That evening, as she sat alone with Mary in her own room, she thought the young girl looked more like a lily than ever. Mary had asked her to come in for a bedtime talk after she had said good-night to the rest of the family; and Mary began the talk with a sweet seriousness that her cousin found charming.

"I 've been wishing for a long time to see you all by myself," she said. "There were too many things to write, and I never can write a letter that satisfies me, either. But I did want you to know how much a certain present of yours had done for me."

"Really? I wonder you don't wear it,

THE PEARL RING

then?" for Cousin Jane had noticed with surprise that the pearl ring was not on her finger.

"I can't exactly wear it," Mary answered, surprised in her turn; "but it has been about with me a great deal, I assure you. And without vanity, I think I can tell you that it has done a good work for an idle, self-indulgent girl."

"If you are the girl, I never heard you described by those adjectives," said Cousin Jane, warmly.

"Because every one has spoiled me. You were the first one to suggest to me that it was never too late to mend."

"That's news, too," returned her cousin. "I never thought, myself, that you needed mending. What do you mean, child?"

"Why, the work-bag, you know. Don't you remember that beautiful silk bag, with the proverbs on the pockets and the silver things inside? The card, too, with such a dear wish on it? Here it is, Cousin Jane, card and all.

THE PEARL RING

It has been my best friend ever since you sent it; though I am ashamed to confess that it was a disappointment—just at first.”

She took the work-bag from its hook, as she spoke, and held it up before her cousin, who could hardly believe the evidence of her own eyes.

“What are you doing with Martha’s bag?” was her astonished outcry. “I never sent that thing to you. I sent it to Martha Redfield.”

“To Martha Redfield?” Mary repeated, dropping the bag in her bewilderment. “What do you mean, Cousin Jane? Who is Martha Redfield?”

“One of my cousins. At least her father was. He is dead now, and she and her mother have none too much to live upon. Martha is in the High School, and means to teach as soon as she can.”

“And you sent the work-bag to her? You meant the mottoes for her? And the card, too?”



"I can't exactly wear it," Mary answered."

THE PEARL RING

"I never noticed that there were any mottoes," said Cousin Jane. "I bought the bag at the Woman's Exchange. It looked strong and serviceable, and I knew Martha would have plenty of use for such a thing. I put the silver scissors, and so forth, inside, to make it a little more festive. As for the card"—holding it up to the light and studying it through her spectacles—"that has no business to be here. It should have gone with the pearl ring, of course."

"The pearl ring!" exclaimed Mary, catching her breath sharply.

"Certainly. The ring that I sent you in a box of candy."

"A box of candy, too? Cousin Jane!"

Mary sat down hastily, and stared before her with an unusual look in her face. Her hands clenched themselves in her lap; she bit her lips to crush back rising tears; and presently she laughed hysterically.

"I hope," she sobbed, unable to control

THE PEARL RING

herself any longer—"I hope Martha Redfield is happy with my ring! It was the thing I wanted you to give me! And one does n't have a box of candy every day—but you like a little—to offer your girlfriends—"

She broke down with a sob; and Cousin Jane, seeing the truth at last, cried out indignantly:

"You shall have another box to-morrow! And Martha shall send back the ring. She might have known it was not meant for her! Never mind, my dear. I suppose I must have made a stupid mistake. I 'm getting old, child! But it won't take long to settle this business. I'll stop and see Martha on my way home to-morrow."

"No, no, Cousin Jane! Please don't!"

Mary pulled herself together with a brave effort.

"I could n't bear to have that done," as she dashed away her tears. "Just fancy how she

THE PEARL RING

would feel! Oh, I know by myself. Please don't!"

"But I meant it for you," protested Cousin Jane, clasping Mary's hand and stroking it fondly. "This is just the dear little hand to wear pearls. They suit it, and they suit you."

"How sweet to have you say so!" And Mary blushed with pleasure, but persisted still: "Martha thinks you meant it for her, all this time; and how mortifying it would be to have to give it up to another girl now! It was foolish and babyish of me to cry about it. I am ashamed of myself; and really I could n't take it from her. I should always feel as if I had robbed her, and so would she. Besides" — with a sunshiny smile and a squeeze of Cousin Jane's hand — "I should have to give up my beloved work-bag, don't you see? And I can't possibly part with that. You listen now till I tell you what a Moral Regenerator my bag has been."

There was a long talk after this—the sort

THE PEARL RING

of talk that girls pour out sometimes to sympathetic older people who are not their mothers or sisters. Cousin Jane discovered that, sweet and lily-like as Mary always was, she had been in danger of growing up indolent, purposeless, even selfish; and that the work-bag and its pointed texts had opened her eyes to that fact. The inference that things were different nowadays followed naturally. It appeared that Mary's mother had been relieved of various household cares—"all the mending, for instance!"—and that the Moral Regenerator had been the leader in organizing a guild to work for the Children's Hospital, where just such work was needed. Mary was very simple and modest about it all, but very much in earnest, full of enthusiasm and self-forgetting interest. Listening to her, Cousin Jane thought that putting one's heart into such work might be one of the ways of seeking and finding "the pearl of great price."

MARTHA HAS A VISITOR

THE PEARL RING

CHAPTER III

MARTHA HAS A VISITOR

LATE in the afternoon of another day she stopped over a train on her way home, to call upon the Redfields. She had faithfully promised not to speak of the mistake which had been made; but after this talk with Mary, she was curious to see if the ring had a story to tell as well as the work-bag.

Fortunately, Mrs. Redfield was not at home. Martha sat alone in the little parlor, studying her lessons between firelight and twilight; but she sprang up to greet her visitor with evident delight.

"Cousin Jane! You are the person I was wishing for just this minute. It's like a fairy godmother that comes when you think of her."

THE PEARL RING

"Indeed? And why did you happen to think of a fairy godmother just now?" asked Cousin Jane, smiling as she took the easy-chair which Martha drew up to the grate for her.

"I don't know. I was trying to study my lessons, but the firelight kept shining on this"—lifting up her ring-finger—"and then I fell to thinking of you, and wishing I could tell you something."

"So you can, you see. I have come to listen to you."

"I see you have! And it truly is like a fairy godmother," cried Martha, her eyes dancing with happy excitement. "But it's been a sort of fairy-tale, you know, ever since I got my ring. Did you guess that it was going to make a real happy little girl, a real good little girl, out of cross-patch Martha?"

"Was n't she happy and good before?" asked Cousin Jane.

"Well—not much. Not always, anyhow."

THE PEARL RING

Martha laughed, and poked the fire till the sparks flew up.

"You see, it comes easy to some girls to be angels," she continued; "but I'm not one of them."

"Comes easy?—why? Because their lives are easy?"

"Partly. It's easier to be good, of course, when you're comfortable, and you know your mother is n't worrying about the house-rent, or your winter clothes, or—'any old thing'! But some girls are good in spite of all that. They have been born sweet, you see, and trials only make them sweeter. Little Martha was n't cut by their pattern."



THE PEARL RING

"What is Martha's pattern, then?" laughed Cousin Jane.

"She was cut on the bias, I'm afraid. And it made her pull the wrong way. She used to look at everything through blue glasses."

"Used to? And what does she do now?"

"She looks through a big, beautiful pearl," said Martha, gayly; "and it makes all the difference in the world."

"Suppose you tell me about it," returned Cousin Jane, very much interested. "I always liked the fairy-tale about pearls and toads."

It is n't quite so bad as that! But still it 's bad enough. May I sit on the hassock at your feet while I tell you? And do you mind not having the gas lighted?"

"Not at all. I can see your face by the fire-light."

"I think I did n't want you to see my face," Martha replied, settling herself on the hassock. "But no matter. I'm going to make an honest confession."

THE PEARL RING

"That 's always good for the soul, my dear."

"You 've been very good to mother and me, Cousin Jane. And my name is Gip," was Martha's beginning. "Only you have to spell it backward."

"Gip?" Cousin Jane looked puzzled.

"Spelled backward," repeated Martha.

"Oh!" And Cousin Jane understood.

"Yes, just so! As I remarked, you 've been awfully good to us, and mother has been grateful. She has welcomed



the new gowns, and the old ones to make over. She has blessed you, with tears in her eyes, for the checks that carried her through tight places. As for me, I've said in my heart every time, 'Cousin Jane treats us like paupers, and we are paupers; but I hate it—I hate it—I

THE PEARL RING

hate it! I wish she would ever send us something that we did n't need."

"Oh!" said Cousin Jane again.

And Martha said again, her cheeks red with honest blushes:

"Yes, just so! I was as mean as that, and I never, never deserved to be rewarded with this dear, lovely ring. But, all the same, it was a beautiful inspiration. What made you think of it, Cousin Jane? I wish you'd tell me!"

"Impossible, my dear," replied Cousin Jane, remembering her promise to Mary. "Perhaps it was just a beautiful inspiration, as you say."

"It has been one to me, at all events. I don't know if I can make you understand, but it uplifted me, and it cast me down. It made me proud, and it made me ashamed."

"They were natural feelings," said Cousin Jane, kindly; "and both were wholesome."

"You think so? Oh, you do understand!"

THE PEARL RING

Martha exclaimed fervently. "How glad I am of the chance to talk it out with you! I'm not a shining light yet—far from it. But whenever I look at this pearl, I think of what I ought to be, and it gives me some of the right kind of thoughts—it truly does."

"I'm truly glad to hear it, Martha."

"I thought you'd like to know that it puts a kind of pearliness into all my views of life. And, on the other hand"—with a twinkle of fun in her honest eyes—"when the girls admire it, and envy me, it's no use denying that I do feel kind of biggety."

"Biggety?" repeated Cousin Jane; and Martha laughed, and explained.

"A little toploftical, I mean. There isn't a girl in our class who has anything to compare with my ring; and it does make me feel so—becoming to myself!"

"You foolish child!"

But Cousin Jane liked the foolishness, and sympathized with the girlish confidences,

THE PEARL RING

which were different from Mary Rutherford's, but as natural and innocent in their way.

Mrs. Redfield came in by and by, and the gas was lighted, and Martha ran off to make a cup of tea for her visitor. Afterward she went down to the railroad station with her; and Cousin Jane thought, as she kissed her good-by, that her mistake had done no one any harm. On the contrary, it had shown her, as she might never have seen it otherwise, the true natures of two lovable girls.

THE READING CLUB

THE PEARL RING

CHAPTER IV

THE READING CLUB

MARTHA REDFIELD came home from school in a little flutter of happy excitement.

"We are busy planning something delightful, mother," she began eagerly, "and I want you to say that you will consent to it.

"Who are 'we'?" asked Mrs. Redfield.

"Some of the girls in my class; our set, you know. We've been discussing preliminaries for a week. Now we're springing it on the mothers, and I want to report tomorrow that mea mater agreed instanter. She does, does n't she?"

"She's apt to, on general principles," her

THE PEARL RING

mother answered, smiling, "for you seldom want unreasonable things."

"Oh, you must n't be too sure of that! I may not always ask for them, but there are lots of unreasonable things that I want awfully!"

"I hope your 'nice plan' is n't in that list."

"I don't think we can call it unreasonable, but it will give you some trouble, mother."

"I'll try to bear it with Christian fortitude."

"And it will be some expense," Martha continued.

"Possibly that can be borne, too."

"Well, you are a darling little mother, anyhow! And it will not be a great extravagance, because we have agreed to take it in turn, and to have very simple refreshments."

"It is a club, then?" Mrs. Redfield inquired.

"A reading club. Is not that something nice and sensible? We all feel as if we ought to know more about general literature. So

THE PEARL RING

we are to meet every Friday afternoon, and one will read aloud while the others sew."

"That sounds pleasant," said Mrs. Redfield. "It will give you a chance to get on with your embroidery."

"Well, I don't know. We thought of fancy work at first, but Mildred Darrow thinks we might do something more useful."

"Mildred Darrow?"

Mrs. Redfield lifted her eyebrows, and Martha made an outcry.

"Now, mother! You never will believe that she is anything but a butterfly, but I tell you that is unjust. If you had seen the little aprons that she made for Sister Sarah's orphans—"

"I've seen the aprons that she wears herself."

"You've seen something pretty, then," returned Martha, a quick color brightening her cheeks—"almost as pretty as she is! When did you see her in an apron, mother?"

THE PEARL RING

"Once when she came here to do some bead-work with you. I think you did the work, and she played with the beads; but she brought her apron, and put it on with an air of business. It was all lace and frills and ribbons—a 'charming confection,' as the fashion articles say. I wondered who made it."

Martha laughed.

"She has a married sister who loves to make pretty things for her. And I like to see her wear them."

"I saw her at school once, when I had an errand for you," continued Mrs. Redfield. "Miss Mildred was at the blackboard, and she wore a silk apron that might have been made for a fancy party. It did not look quite suitable to me."

"Now, mother, don't!" protested Martha. "You know I love Milly Darrow; and what's the harm in her wearing pretty things?"

"I was only wondering if she made silk aprons for Sister Sarah's orphans."

THE PEARL RING

"No; they were blue gingham with long sleeves, and Sister Sarah was glad enough to get them. She's glad to get anything for those poor children. So Milly suggested that we should sew for them, and she offered to bring the stuff for a dozen aprons. That shows the sort of girl she is, I should think! But because she is pretty, and likes pretty clothes, you think—"

"That my Martha loves her," interrupted her mother, affectionately. "And that's enough to prove she is worth loving."

"Now you are nice!" exclaimed Martha, her eyes shining with pleasure. "And it's



THE PEARL RING

true, mother. She is well worth loving, in spite of being a sort of butterfly. But, for my part, I don't see why butterflies should be despised. They must be good for something, or God would n't have made them; and you may say what you like for busy bees—butterflies are pleasanter to look at, anyway, and much pleasanter to have around! They never sting you, and Milly is like them in that. You never hear her say mean things. She does n't know how to sting."

"In short, she is Mildred Darrow, and you love her! But if you will stop to consider, you will see that I never called her names at all," said Mrs. Redfield. "So, instead of defending her, suppose you tell me more about the club. You are to read, you are to sew, you are to have tea?"

"Yes; or, more likely, chocolate, with sandwiches or biscuits, and something sweet, I suppose. But it need n't bother you, mother. I can make everything myself."

THE PEARL RING

"And who are the other members? How many have you?"

"A dozen, altogether. The Appletons are two; then Edith Barton and Clara Canfield are four; and Milly and I make six," said Martha, counting them off on her fingers; "Florry Woodley and Mabel Ford are eight; the Elliots and Fanny Grey are eleven; and Hilda Morrison is the twelfth—but she's doubtful."

"Doubtful?—why?"

"Because we are not sure that we want her. She is n't just the girl we should have thought of, but she proposed herself as a member; that is to say, she told Milly Darrow that she would like to be in the club, and Milly said she would ask the others, because she did n't want to hurt her feelings."

"What's the objection to her?"

"It's a case of Dr. Fell, I fancy. The reason why I cannot tell!" replied Martha.

"Nobody seems to care for Hilda Morrison,

THE PEARL RING

and she never seems to care for anybody. I wondered at her wanting to join."

"Perhaps she would like to be cared for," suggested Mrs. Redfield. "It may be a chance to do a kindness."

"So Milly said when the others objected. Some of them were unwilling to have her, but she thought it would be unkind to refuse."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, I voted with Milly, of course. I don't like Hilda Morrison," added Martha, frankly. "She's a kind of a clam—never has any enthusiasms; never seems to care whether the world goes round or not."

"Still, she wants to join the club?"

"Yes; and I suppose we'll have to let her! I do hope she will get a new dress, however, and not wear that long-suffering brown serge to the meetings. It's too shabby for endurance."

"Is she shabby from choice?" asked Mrs.

THE PEARL RING

Redfield; and Martha blushed, for there was a significant tone in her voice.

"I suppose not," she answered. "And I suppose I ought to sympathize with her necessity, if that's what you mean by shaking your accusing looks at me! But really and truly, mother, that old frock is horrid. She has worn it all winter, and it looks as if it was made in the Ark, to begin with."

"Poor girl!"

"But she hasn't the air of a 'poor girl' that one can pity," objected Martha. "She never seems to consider her looks, and though



THE PEARL RING

Milly admires her for that—it's a pitch of self-control, she says, that is quite above her—I think it is very stupid. A girl ought to know how she looks, and care, too."

"She probably does both," said Mrs. Redfield, "and is too proud to show it. If I were you, I think I would take pains to make that girl welcome, in spite of the old frock."

"Oh, I mean to," cried Martha, twisting her ring round her finger, and laughing mischievously. "If we take her in I'll try to be pearl-y to her. But it's funny, ma'am, to see that you and The Butterfly have just the same opinion!"

THE DOUBTFUL MEMBER

THE PEARL RING

CHAPTER V

THE DOUBTFUL MEMBER

IT was not long after this before the new club was organized and the first meeting—alphabetically decided—was held at the house of the Appleton sisters. Martha came home radiantly satisfied with everything. The girls had been prompt and harmonious; the reading was interesting; Mrs. Appleton was most hospitable; the chocolate was served with whipped cream; the eclairs were delicious; and finally—“Mirabile dictu!” spouted Martha (who was “doing” Latin that year, and rather vain of it), “Hilda Morrison had a new frock. It was not a dream of beauty, and I’m not sure that it was really new; but it was not the old brown serge, at any rate.”

THE PEARL RING

"Then your 'doubtful member' is accepted?"

"Oh, yes. Milly settled it somehow. You ought to have seen her to-day. She was a picture."

"Did she have a new apron?"

"You are always laughing at her aprons, mother! But she did; it's her fad, you know. Because no one else wears them nowadays, she chooses to have bewitching ones. To-day it was a pink China silk, with ruffles and bretelles, and she wore it over her green poplin. She looked as sweet and dainty as a wild rose," said Martha, with enthusiasm.

"And how much sewing did you do for the orphans?"

"Not a great deal," Martha confessed. "Milly brought some gingham, and Mrs. Appleton cut out two little Mother Hubbards. I made a pair of sleeves."

"Well, I am glad the meeting was a success," said Mrs. Redfield, "and I hope Hilda Morrison enjoyed it."

THE PEARL RING

"I don't know whether she did or not," was the careless answer. "She's such an indefinite article, you know. But she's harmless enough, at all events. She'll not be in our way."

There was apparently little more than this to be said of "the doubtful member" for a month or more of pleasant Fridays. The meetings followed each other in orderly succession, and every one was reported as only "nicer" than the last, until the day came for Mildred Darrow to entertain the club. Martha had looked for this occasion with only the happiest expectations; but instead of bringing home the usual smiling countenance, she came in with a very sober face—so full of trouble, indeed, that her mother cried out anxiously:

"What is the matter, dear? You look as if something had happened!"

"Something has happened," was the grave reply; "a very serious something, mother. I have lost my ring."

THE PEARL RING

"Why, Martha!"

"Yes, mother"—her lips were trembling, though she tried to speak with composure—"my ring has disappeared—vanished from the face of the earth, apparently! An hour ago I had it. Now it is nowhere."

"But, my dear! that is impossible. What do you mean me to understand? What has happened to it? You are not Cleopatra!" exclaimed Mrs. Redfield, in bewilderment.

"No, I did n't dissolve it in vinegar," said Martha, forlornly, "and no one else did, to my knowledge. But I'll tell you all I know about it," she continued, sitting down with a desolate air that made her mother clasp the ringless hand with quick tenderness. "It was at the club, of course, and we had finished reading. I was folding up my work, and clearing the table for the tray that was coming presently, when Edith Barton said, 'Let me take your ring a minute, Martha. I want to show it to my cousin.' That was Maud

THE PEARL RING

Erwin, a cousin from Philadelphia who is visiting her, and Edith brought her to-day as a guest."

"Well," said Mrs. Redfield, "and you took the ring off?"

"I took the ring off," said Martha, "and handed it across the table to Edith. Several of the girls were standing with her, and they all wanted to look at it. Just then, while it was being passed from one to another, the tray was brought in, and Milly asked me to help her serve the chocolate. Of course I did it, and, being busy with cups and saucers, I paid no attention to the ring. Moreover, while I was still pouring chocolate, the maid came in again with another tray, and a



THE PEARL RING

message: 'Some one had called for Miss Hilda Morrison, and would she please come directly, for her mother was very sick.' Naturally this made a commotion. Hilda was standing near Milly, who sat behind the tray, putting whipped cream in the cups. She had just given one to Hilda, who started so at the message—and no wonder!—that she dropped it right into Milly's lap. Then she cried out, and snatched a napkin to wipe off the hot chocolate that was streaming over everything. And her awkward hands (she's a clumsy thing, mother!) only made it worse; and though Milly begged her not to mind, she was so excited that she began to cry. So it was all fuss and flurry for a minute or two, and what with clearing up the mess, and trying to comfort Hilda and get her started for home, I never thought of my ring till after she had gone."

"But then?"



“ Naturally this made a commotion.”

THE PEARL RING

"Then," said Martha, reluctantly, "the ring was gone, too."

"You do not mean—" Mrs. Redfield began to speak, and stopped herself as if too shocked to finish her sentence.

"I don't know what I mean, mother. I've told you what happened."

"But the others? Did you ask them? Did no one know anything? The girl who borrowed it should have known where it was."

"I thought she would, of course; but she said that she gave it to Maud, and Maud passed it to Kate Appleton, and Florry Woodley took it from her. Clara Canfield had it next, and gave it to Mabel Ford, and all the girls say that Hilda asked for it last, and that Mabel gave it to her."

"Is Mabel sure that she did not return it?"

"Perfectly, and so are the others. Indeed, Edith remembers seeing it in Hilda's hands just as the chocolate was brought. She suggested that she might have laid it down some-

THE PEARL RING

where, which would have been like her absent-minded ways! So we searched the room, every nook and corner. We emptied everybody's work-bag; we even upset the sugar-bowl, and poked in the cake-basket among the crumbs. I simply could n't believe it would n't be found somewhere, so we hunted high and low; but all to no purpose."

"And the upshot of it all—"

"Is that every one thinks Hilda carried it away, whether she meant to or not. She might have done it unconsciously."

"Which seems to me the solution of the mystery," said Mrs. Redfield, looking suddenly relieved. "She probably slipped it on her finger without thinking. I have known such things to be done in perfect innocence. In fact, something like it happened to me once. You remember the time that my gold thimble was missing for a month, and it was all the time in the pocket of Aunt Hannah's traveling-dress?"

THE PEARL RING

"I remember, mother; and if girls had pockets in their dresses nowadays—"

"It would be very sensible, and they would not lose so many small articles," said Mrs. Redfield, who had old-fashioned notions about pockets. "But never mind that. Take my word for it, Martha, your ring was carried off unconsciously; and if I were you—"

"I know what you are going to say," interrupted Martha, with a faint smile. "Mildred had the same idea; and although it seemed a heartless thing to do, when Hilda had gone away in such trouble, we decided to do it."

"To follow the girl home, you mean?"

"Yes, mother. Milly said—putting herself in Hilda's place—it was what she would rather have us do, for it was the quickest way of finding out. She felt sure that it was all accidental, and that Hilda would be glad of the chance to return the ring immediately. For my part, I felt that I must find it as soon

THE PEARL RING

as possible. So we went to Hilda's house together."

"Well? And did not you see her?" asked her mother, eagerly.

"We saw her," Martha replied, with a rueful look; "but I almost wish we had not. She knew nothing about the ring, was sure she had returned it to the girl who gave it to her, and thought we were very unkind to come and torment her about such a thing at such a time. 'What did she care for pearl rings when her poor mother was dying?'"

"Dying? Is it as bad as that?"

Mrs. Redfield looked shocked, and Martha sighed mournfully.

"That was what she said. I hope it may not be true! But there were two doctors in the house, and Hilda looked as if she had been crying her eyes out. We could only beg her to forgive us, and hurry away."

"This is dreadful!" cried Martha's mother,

THE PEARL RING

full of pity for both girls. And Martha echoed the words drearily.

"It is dreadful, mother! It makes me feel like a wretch to care for anything else in the face of such trouble. But still—my ring, my dear, beautiful pearl! How can I bear to lose it? And how can I ever tell Cousin Jane of the loss?"

"She would never blame you, poor child!" said her mother, tenderly. "I cannot see that you were in fault at all."

"I suppose I ought to have kept my eyes upon it when it was going the rounds," sighed Martha. "But there was Milly wanting me to help her, and I never dreamed but that Edith would look after it, and bring it back to me all right."

"Which she ought to have done," rejoined Mrs. Redfield, more severely than she was apt to speak. "I consider that she is the one who is responsible for the whole matter."

SUSPICIONS

THE PEARL RING

CHAPTER VI

SUSPICIONS

THERE was a certain satisfaction in being able to blame somebody; and Edith was clearly in fault for carelessness, and still more, Mrs. Redfield thought, for her readiness to accuse Hilda. It was she who had insisted upon having seen it last in Hilda's hands, and Martha could not help agreeing with her mother that it was an easy but not quite generous way of shifting responsibility, seeing that Hilda was not there to speak for herself.

In spite of this, and of her pity for the girl, and of the fact that her mother was inclined to defend her, Martha had a haunting suspicion. She did not put it into words; she

THE PEARL RING

would hardly let herself think the dreadful thing; but it was like "the one persistent fly;" she could not get rid of it. Not only Edith, but most of the other girls, were positive in their assertion that Hilda had the ring last. She could not doubt their testimony, and she knew how carefully the room had been searched. Things could not vanish without active agency, and all the circumstances favored Hilda's agency. It might have been a sudden temptation; it might have been purely mechanical and unconscious; but, one way or the other, she must have done it.

All Martha's ponderings ended with this conviction; but she kept it to herself very carefully. When the reading club (with one exception) came in a body next day to reiterate sympathy, and, on Milly Darrow's part, to say that her mother had had the house swept from top to bottom, and every dust-pan sifted, in a vain hope of finding the ring, she begged them to say no more about it.

THE PEARL RING

"It's a mystery that we can't explain, and the more we talk of it, the more puzzling it grows. Just forget, please, that I ever had a ring."

"That's very sweet of you," said Edith Barton; "but if your mother had read you such a lecture as mama gave me last night, you would n't talk of forgetting things. According to her, I'm the Jonah, and throwing overboard is what I deserve."

"Nonsense, Edith!"

"Words of wisdom, you mean! She did make me feel guilty of the whole thing. And you have a right to think so, too, for I certainly should have been more careful. But I never dreamed of any danger—"

"Of course you did not," Martha hastened to say, touched by Edith's self-accusation, and eager to comfort her. "How could you? It is no one's fault; it is only my misfortune. I must just bear it as well as I can."

"Well, you are lovely to take it so! It's

THE PEARL RING

more than I could do," returned Edith. "In your place I should want to make it hot for somebody. As for Hilda Morrison—"

She stopped with a significant expression, that was reflected in the faces of most of the others. After a pause one or two murmured assentingly:

"Hilda Morrison!"

But Martha asked quietly:

"Just what—as to Hilda Morrison?"

"Oh, you know!" Edith exclaimed impulsively. "What's the use of pretending? You know as well as we do that she took the ring."

"I know nothing of the kind," said Martha, promptly.

"And neither do I," added Milly Darrow. "Leave me out when you say 'we.' I don't believe she had any more to do with it than you or I, or Martha herself."

"Besides, it is not fair to accuse a person who is not here to answer back," said Martha, with emphasis. "She assured me yesterday

THE PEARL RING

that she had not taken the ring. And since her mother is dying—maybe dead, for all we know—it seems cruel to be saying such things of a poor girl in such trouble. If any of you think that my feelings ought to be considered in this matter, you will never say them again.”

Martha’s little speech was made quietly, but it produced an impression.

The girls exchanged meaning glances, and no one spoke until Edith said, bluntly:

“If that’s the way you feel, I can hold my tongue, for one. It’s little enough to do.”

“That’s the way I feel,” answered Martha, bravely.

“As to Mrs. Morrison,” continued Edith, “she’s neither dead nor dying. She had a bad attack of ‘angina’ something or other—the thing with a Latin name, you know—and very likely she would have died if the doctors had n’t come in time. But she is out of danger this morning.”

“Are you sure of that?”

THE PEARL RING

"Quite sure. My father was one of the doctors."

"Well! that's a great relief." Martha gave a sigh of satisfaction as she answered. "I lay awake last night, thinking, and wondering, and hoping. I am truly glad!"

"You are a funny girl!" said Edith, looking at Martha with a puzzled expression.

But Mildred put both arms round her neck and kissed her. She understood.

It was nearly a week later before Hilda came back to school. She did not appear, in fact, till the next Friday morning. And, except for a chance meeting on the street with Mildred Darrow, no one had seen her meanwhile. Taking her seat in the usual place, and with the usual listless air, no one would have suspected that she had had any disturbing experiences in the interval. She went through the ordinary routine of the class without seeming to notice that curious glances were turned toward her from time to time, and no one

THE PEARL RING

but Martha saw that her eyelids quivered now and then, and that a curious spot of color came and went in her sallow cheeks.

Martha watched her with sidelong glances, half pitiful, half suspicious, and she fought a silent battle with herself before she went to her, as she sat alone at recess, and held out her hand with a cordial greeting.

"Glad to see you back, Hilda. Is your mother all right now?"

"All right?" Hilda looked up with a start. "Oh, yes; right as she ever is. She's always ailing. Did you find your ring?"

"Not yet."

"I suppose they all think that I took it," said Hilda, with blunt bitterness. "I saw them looking at me as if they did, and you are the only one of them that has spoken to me."

"You haven't given them a chance," said Martha. "You came in late, you know."

"There has been chance enough since, if

THE PEARL RING

they wanted it! But I don't care. All I mind is what you think—you and Milly!"

She searched Martha's face with anxious, questioning eyes, that sent a pang to the kind heart.

"If you had heard what Milly said the other day—what we both of us said," she exclaimed impulsively—"you would have been satisfied, Hilda."

"Would I truly, Martha? Oh! that makes me happy!"

The girl's voice shook, her eyes filled with tears, and all at once she dropped her head on the desk before her with a burst of silent but irrepressible sobbing. Martha was beside her in a moment, and her arm round her neck. A sudden illumination seemed to come to her. She did not know how or why, but the cloud of suspicion, the doubt that haunted her, the fear she had fought against, fled before it.

"Forgive me, Hilda!" she whispered in her

A. Clendenin Williamson



"She dropped her head on the desk."

THE PEARL RING

ear, penitently and entreatingly. "Do try to forgive me!"

"For what?" Hilda lifted her wondering face, and Martha's handkerchief brushed away the tears that stained it.

"The girls are coming; don't let them see you crying," she whispered hastily. "Just tell me something before they are here: will you go to the reading club this afternoon?"

"Will anybody want me?"

"Of course they will. Milly, come here, please; and you, too, Mabel!"—as a group of girls appeared at the door. "I 've just been telling Hilda that we all are expecting to see her at the club to-day. It meets at your house, so you can speak for yourself."

Mabel hesitated for half a moment, but Martha's bright, confident look compelled an answer.

"Why, certainly; we are expecting—all the members," she replied.

And Milly Darrow added, cheerfully:

THE PEARL RING

"To be sure we're expecting her. We haven't had a break in the ranks yet, and I hope we'll keep on so. I'll call for you as I go, Hilda. It is right in my way."

Hilda's face flushed, and she looked about her with a bewildered air. "I was not sure," she faltered, turning to Milly—"I mean I expected—" But whatever she was going to say was cut short by the monitor's bell; and linking arms with her familiarly, as she had never done before, Martha hurried



her back to the class-room.

Mabel lingered for a whispered word to her companion:

"Did you ever see such a girl? Does she mean it?"

THE PEARL RING

"Yes, she does. And so do I. If we want to keep Martha in the club, we'll have to be nice to Hilda; I can tell you that."

"Well!" Mabel drew a long breath full of surprise. "It's very queer. But no one wants to get rid of Martha!"

Queer or not, Martha had made up her mind, and she was not a girl to do things by halves. Once convinced that she had wronged Hilda by an unjust suspicion, even though she had never expressed it, she could not do enough to make amends. And she was at once too positive and too popular a character for the girls to oppose her.

"Let her have her way," they said, "if that comforts her for losing her ring!"

IN A STRANGE HOUSE

THE PEARL RING

CHAPTER VII

IN A STRANGE HOUSE

SO, instead of turning the cold shoulder to Hilda Morrison when she appeared at the club-meeting, the girls followed the example set by Mildred and Martha, treating "the doubtful member" with especial consideration.

Mabel, as hostess, welcomed her graciously, and the others, following her lead, were careful not to leave her out of the general conversation. No one alluded ever so distantly to the unpleasant scene of the last gathering, and Mabel had even omitted the favorite chocolate lest it should be a reminder. Tea-cups in hand, when refreshments were served, they discussed the characters of the book they were reading, and asked Hilda's opinion of

THE PEARL RING

their historical accuracy. "Because history is your strong point, you know"—which was quite true. And to her own amazement, Hilda found herself saying things that were worth saying, and being listened to with polite attention.

It was altogether a very polite assembly, indeed. Hilda went home thrilled with the excitement of the unexpected, and with a sense of sudden expansion in her horizon.

Martha, too, was conscious of a thrill in her own sensations. It had cost her an effort to meet Hilda cordially; but the effort had brought its distinct reward. She had not felt so light-hearted since her loss, the mystery of which was quite as mysterious as ever—more so, if anything. But the charity that is kind, and thinketh no evil, had entered in and brought a host of compensations.

So days and weeks went by, throwing no new light upon the mystery, but bringing no

THE PEARL RING

change in Martha's determination to "make up" to Hilda for her brief injustice.

Milly Darrow came, one afternoon, with a tempting proposition. There were new humming-birds to be mounted at the Museum of Natural History. "About fifty thousand," Milly said—"but maybe it was only five thousand!" At any rate, they were wonderful, and her uncle was one of the curators, and he would show them everything, and make it so interesting.

"Put on your things, Martha, as quick as you can. We'll have a lovely time!"

But Martha shook her head. "I can't do it, Milly. I promised Hilda to go there this afternoon."

"Oh, what for? You'll see enough of her to-morrow, when she has the club."

"The club is just the reason," said Martha. "I promised to help her get ready."

"Well, I never did! Has n't Hilda got a mother?"

THE PEARL RING

"I suppose so. I 've never seen her, though."

"Nor I. Do you suppose she is sick all the time, or is it just laziness?" said Milly, crossly. "I 'm downright disappointed, Martha. I wanted you this afternoon!"

"Don't you think I 'm disappointed, too?" sighed Martha. "It 's a temptation, Milly."

"But you 're going to resist it; I see it with my eyes and hear it with my ears, Henny-Penny! So I may as well take myself off without you."

And she did, snatching a kiss as she went, to which Mrs. Redfield, who had overheard the little colloquy, added another.

"I think your ring must have been a sort of talisman," she said, as Martha passed by her.

"Why, mother?" asked Martha, curiously.

"It made you so happy when you got it, and now that you have lost it, it makes you so sweet. The 'pearliness' stays."

From her mother, who never said any more

THE PEARL RING

than she meant, this was so much that Martha felt richly rewarded for her little self-denial, and Hilda was never told that anything pleasant had been renounced for her sake.

It was an anxious time to Hilda, this first club-meeting at her own house, for she had no aunt or sister or intimate friend who "knew how to do things," and her mother's health had always been uncertain. Hilda never could remember her as active or energetic; and there had never been children's parties, or holiday merrymakings, or music and dancing at their house. She loved her mother dearly, and did not think of complaining. She had always been used to the silent house, where her mother lay on the sofa, and her father read his newspaper in the evening, and she had her lessons to study and then went to bed. But the reading club, and the chatter of the other girls, and the discovery of how things were done at other houses, had been an education.

THE PEARL RING

When the time drew near for her to undertake the simple entertainment herself, she began to grow nervous and to make mental comparisons. Martha discovered, one day, how much she was dreading it, and thereupon made the offer of assistance, which was accepted with a fervor of gratitude that seemed absurd to the other girl, to whom household accomplishments were a matter of course. But when she came to keep her promise she understood it better.

The dreary look of the parlor, the careless ways of the kitchen, and Hilda's ignorance of the most ordinary "housekeepery" knowledge, were all amazing. In their own little home, where a servant had not been afforded for years, everything was neat, bright, cozily comfortable. But in this house the mistress was an invalid, the maid was slovenly and wasteful, the daughter so helplessly ignorant that Martha could not comprehend it; and, naturally, the results were visible in what

THE PEARL RING

to Martha seemed an appalling state of things.

"The waste in that kitchen would pay for all the new dresses that Hilda does n't have," she said to her mother, afterward.

"Think of pounds of butter left melting on the kitchen table all day, and the breakfast-dishes not washed till dinner-time, and the cats in the back yard fighting over the best half of a leg of mutton! We should be in the poor-



house if we wasted our substance like that. But Hilda says her mother never goes into the kitchen, so it's no wonder. She was perfectly amazed at seeing me do things as if I knew how, and the servant-girl just stood and

THE PEARL RING

gaped at me. But I gave her something better to do," added Martha, laughing at the recollection. "I stirred her up to something like work, and it made a difference in the looks of things, I promise you!"

"In a strange house, my dear? Weren't you rather officious?" asked Mrs. Redfield.

"Oh, no! Hilda begged me to tell her what to do; and the girl was good-natured, if she was stupid. And the parlor and hall were disgraceful with dust and cobwebs. I set her to sweeping, and I think she really liked it. While I made cake and jelly downstairs, she swept and dusted, and washed windows in the parlor. Then Hilda and I moved the furniture about, so that things would n't look so stiff, and the girl was delighted. 'Sure, it's you for knowing how!' she said. 'This place never looked so dacent before.' And I doubt if it ever did," concluded Martha. "At any rate, it will be respectable to-morrow. I shall go round early, and see that the trays are in

THE PEARL RING

order, and help Hilda to receive. I guess she will get through all right."

"Thanks to my busy bee," said her mother. And Martha laughed, and said she did n't know but it was better fun than the museum and the humming-birds.

"We have n't kept a servant since I was a little girl, you know, and I felt rather pompous giving orders to this maid—which her name it is Delia, of course!—just as if I had a houseful under me. I positively enjoyed it."

"Which is a compensation, perhaps, for not having the houseful."

"Just so, mea mater! Because, if I had, I might be as ignorant as Hilda, you mean? Knowledge is certainly power," laughed Martha, "even in baking cake. You ought to have seen how nicely mine turned out, and how pleased Hilda was!"

"There's a compensation somewhere for every sort of trial, I think," said Mrs. Red-

THE PEARL RING

field, thoughtfully. "You are learning some of them, Martha."

And she did not say so, but she thought that unselfishness and charity and cheerful effort to help others were pearls worth more to Martha than the one she had lost.

THANKSGIVING DAY

THE PEARL RING

CHAPTER VIII

THANKSGIVING DAY

TIME passed, and brought no trace of Martha's ring, either with April showers or May flowers. Tulips and daffodils gave place to lilacs and honeysuckles and June roses. Then all at once summer was at hand, and Fourth of July, and the long vacation, which meant holiday trips to seashore and mountain for many of Martha's schoolmates, but for her rather a dull time in their absence. The Darrows always went away immediately; and though Mildred's letters were precious, the time was long till she returned to the girl who was left behind in the lonesome city. Martha said good-by to Milly and the rest of the happy crowd, who were starting off for one

THE PEARL RING

charming spot or another, with some wistful yearnings. And when Hilda came, all in a breathless excitement, to tell her that she was going with her mother to a sanitarium in the Pennsylvania hills—"a lovely place that looks like a castle built on a cliff"—Martha felt as if she were deserted indeed.

A year ago she would have laughed at the idea of its making any difference; but now Hilda was a person to be missed. From being simply one to whom to be kind, she had grown one of whom to be fond; and glad as she was that pleasant things were coming to Hilda, it made the long stretch of summer in town seem more lonesome than ever for herself.

Happily, it occurred to Cousin Jane, just as she was about leaving for Newport, where Mary Rutherford was to spend the summer with her, that here was an opportunity to do something for "little Martha." Cousin Jane had been "lovely" about the lost ring. She had written the kindest letters in reply to Mar-

THE PEARL RING

tha's mournful history, and had even offered to give her another as nearly like it as possible. More than this, she had "understood" when the offer was gratefully declined. She knew (as Martha said) that it would not be the same thing, and she certainly did not think less of the girl to whom the pearl meant so much more than a mere ornament that she could not bear a substitute.

One sultry July day, then, when Martha and her mother were pretending not to mind the sultriness, but were secretly minding it very much indeed, there came a letter from Cousin Jane which inclosed a check. It also inclosed an illustrated circular, not of a fashionable hotel, which they would not have liked, but of a delightful old house on Cape Ann, where summer board was reasonable, and where rocky meadows, shady trees, and charming roads that led everywhere to the glorious sea were thrown in for nothing.

Needless to say that no time was lost in

THE PEARL RING

reaching this paradise! As to the happy weeks they spent there, any girl who has climbed the rocks, and frolicked in the surf, and gathered the wild roses of Cape Ann will need no one to tell how days flew on that enchanting coast. Martha wrote rapturous letters to Cousin Jane, to Milly Darrow, to Hilda Morrison, got answers more or less rapturous in turn, and came back in September, sunburnt and sturdy, to compare experiences and exchange trophies of sea and land with the other wanderers. Then came school again, with wholesome work after play, and autumn leaves in the parks, and autumn colors in one's ribbons, till at last the windy sunsets and withering frosts of November came, and Thanksgiving was in the air.

"I've a great mind to do something rash," said Martha, one day. "If you don't object, mother dear, I want to ask Cousin Jane to spend Thanksgiving with us."

"Do you think she would come? She will

THE PEARL RING

have a dozen invitations, I dare say, that she is more likely to accept," was the answer.

"The only way to prove that is to ask her. We never have asked her—for obvious reasons," said Martha. "They are just as obvious as ever, you will say; but I would like to give her the chance to refuse us, at all events."

"I suppose you remember that you have the reading club next day?"

"Certainly. That's one reason why I want Cousin Jane to come and stay over Friday. I want her to see Hilda—and my Milly."

"Well, just as you like," said Mrs. Redfield.

She was a little dubious about entertaining Cousin Jane, who was used to such a different style of living. "But we'll do our best," she said, seeing that Martha really wished it. So the invitation was sent, written in a hearty way that pleased Cousin Jane, and a letter of acceptance came back by return mail. Martha clapped her hands at this.

"I knew she would come!" she cried trium-

THE PEARL RING

phantly, "and she will enjoy it, too. You need n't be nervous, mother. It will be all right."

"We can't give her a course dinner and French dishes," said Mrs. Redfield; "but, just for once, she may like something simple and old-fashioned. Your father used to tell me about Thanksgiving dinners at Grandmother Chapin's when they were children. He liked her best of all the cousins, and they had many a romp together in the old homestead."

"So much the better. We'll give her a New England Thanksgiving, with a genuine, far-famed Yankee pumpkin-pie!"

And whether that was achieved or not, Cousin Jane found the homely dinner very much to her taste when she sat down to it. The little house was shining with sweet cleanliness; the table was bright with chrysanthemums; and there was something in the savor of the turkey that carried her back to

THE PEARL RING

childhood days, when Thanksgiving at Grandmother Chapin's was the event of the year.

It was a long time since she had thought of those days. There were few people left to recall them. But she enjoyed Mrs. Redfield's remembrance of things her husband had told her, and delighted Martha, in turn, with reminiscences of her father's boyhood. The old-fashioned dinner was thoroughly pleasant to them all, and afterward, when they sat round



the fire with nuts and apples and cider, there were deeply interesting things to talk about. Cousin Jane wanted to know every detail concerning the loss of the ring, with all the history of the reading club since, and with

THE PEARL RING

Martha's candid opinion of every individual member.

"It is such an unaccountable disappearance," she said, "that I can't help thinking somebody must know more than she chooses to tell. Do you really feel sure of all those girls? And how is it about the maid who brought in the trays?"

"She could not have touched it," was Martha's answer. "Florry Woodley owned to having it herself after that maid went out. And she was seen to give it to some one else. In fact, even if any of them ever could have been suspected, it was proved by each one in turn that some other girl had it after her."

"And the last girl was Hilda Morrison?—leaving you and your friend Mildred out of the question, of course."

"So they all agree," admitted Martha. "And I was mean enough to believe horrid things of poor Hilda for a week."

"But not afterward?"

THE PEARL RING

"Never afterward, Cousin Jane."

"Three words from Hilda were enough to convince Martha of her innocence," Mrs. Redfield added. "The others, it must be confessed, were not so easily satisfied. Hilda would never have been taken into favor again if Martha had not stood by her so bravely. But I think she was right."

Cousin Jane smiled, and stroked the slim, ringless hand that lay on her knee. She was not quite certain of the right, but she liked the generous spirit.

"My own idea," continued Mrs. Redfield, "is that Hilda really had the ring last, and that she lost it on her way home. She probably had it in her hand, or it may have dropped into some fold of her dress, and hurrying home in such an excitement, it might easily have slipped from her before she remembered having had it."

"Or it might be still lurking in some corner of the room where it was last seen," suggested

THE PEARL RING

Cousin Jane. "I have known of small articles being hidden for years in a big cushioned chair, and coming to light after they were forgotten. But of course a thorough search was made of everything."

"Oh, everything!" sighed Martha. "Milly and I hugged that delusion for weeks, till Mrs. Darrow said her furniture would be ruined, between us, and we really must stop prodding the sofas and chairs."

"Well, I am to see this famous reading club to-morrow, am I? I shall have to put on my spectacles and play private detective. Perhaps I can pick out the transgressor."

"I give you leave to try," said Martha, fearlessly. "But it will not be Hilda."

"Nor your best friend?" asked Cousin Jane, smiling, "your chum with the pretty name?"

"Mildred Darrow?" Martha answered the smile with another, that was very bright and confident. "No, Cousin Jane; Milly Darrow will not be the transgressor."

A GOOD INVESTMENT

THE PEARL RING

CHAPTER IX

A GOOD INVESTMENT

BUT next day, when the meeting-hour arrived, and every one else appeared promptly, Martha was the first to find fault with the laggard Milly.

"She knew I wanted her to come early," she complained. "She knew that Cousin Jane would be here."

And as one after another arrived, till hers was the only vacant place, the young hostess grew restlessly impatient. She wanted to get through with the reading and the sewing, that she might introduce the girls to Cousin Jane. She particularly wanted to introduce Milly. What could be keeping her? She wandered about listening at the door, watching at the

THE PEARL RING

window, till the punctual members began to feel ill used.

“Do sit down, Martha, and begin to read. What’s the use of waiting for Milly Darrow all the afternoon?”

So Martha had to take up her duty; but she attended to it with a divided mind. “Why does n’t she come?” was the worrying thought that seemed to run across her pages like an active interrogation-point. And she barely kept herself from reading the question into a thrilling scene where it did not belong at all, and would have made utter nonsense. As it was, Edith Barton exclaimed presently:

“Do read that sentence again, Martha. I can’t make head or tail of it.”

“No wonder!” laughed Mabel Ford. “She has turned over two pages.”

“Oh, how stupid!”

Martha began again, with a red cheek, but was stopped once more by a burst of merry laughter.

THE PEARL RING

"You have turned too far back now. We've heard all that before."

"Well, I seem to have lost my wits," cried Martha, laying the book down in confusion. "Somebody else had better read in my place."

"If Milly Darrow would be good enough to put in an appearance," suggested Mabel, laughingly.

And as if the laugh drew her, there was a commotion in the hall at that minute, with a sudden rush at the door, and Milly Darrow herself burst in upon the meeting, tearing off hat and cloak as she came, and presenting a figure that was hard to recognize for that dainty young person's. Her dress was disheveled, her hair tumbled, her face stained



THE PEARL RING

with tears; and instead of the usual silk apron with its pretty frills and furbelows, a discolored rag, all stains and tatters, hung from her waist.

At such an apparition there rose a cry of dismay, as with one voice: "Why, Milly Darrow! What have you been doing to yourself?"

But Martha sprang before them all, and threw protecting arms round her.

"Milly! My own darling! Tell me!" she entreated.

"Oh! oh! oh!"

Mildred threw out her arms with a tragic gesture, and wailed like a Greek chorus:

"Send me to a dungeon-cell, Martha! Put me in solitary confinement where I can hide my face forever. But don't ask me to tell you!"

"I'll tell her!" exclaimed Hilda Morrison, her eyes shining like stars. "I see it all, Martha. She has found your ring!"



“Send me to a dungeon-cell, Martha.”

THE PEARL RING

"It was she that lost it!" sobbed Milly, dropping on her knees and hiding her face in Martha's skirts. She's the wretch who made all the trouble!"

And then came a tempest of tears and hysterical crying that

could not be controlled. The girls gathered round with frightened faces.

Martha clung to her friend with passionate entreaties and caresses; Hilda ran for a glass of water; and in the midst of it all Mrs. Redfield and



Cousin Jane came hurrying down to see if fire or flood or an earthquake had overtaken the meeting!

By this time it was hard to tell whether Martha or Hilda or Milly herself was respon-

THE PEARL RING

sible for the disturbance. They were all on the floor together, and Hilda was clutching a disreputable rag, chocolate-stained and mouse-eaten, as if it were a treasure of treasures, while Martha, utterly regardless of the pearl that shone once more on her finger, was dabbling water over Milly's face with one hand, and tilting the full tumbler upon her neck with the other.

Cousin Jane's mildly astonished look, as she took the tumbler from Martha, had a reviving effect; and Mrs. Redfield's soothing tones and touches as she raised the weeping Milly acted presently like oil upon the water. The sobs subsided, the incoherent exclamations resolved themselves into intelligent speech, and the history of the ring, its losing and its finding, was presently clear to everybody.

It was another instance of a mystery with nothing mysterious in it. Just the accident of a trembling hand and a tilted cup; and then, though everybody was right in the premises,

THE PEARL RING

for Hilda did have the ring last, everybody was wrong in the conclusion. Held in her unconscious hand, the ring had fallen with the falling cup and been caught, with the thick stream of chocolate, in Milly's apron pocket. Of course the ruined apron, hastily rolled into a damp wad and thrown aside, was stuffed into a rag-bag afterward by careless Milly, and never remembered again. Mrs. Redfield thought, and Martha knew she was thinking it, that such a thing could not have happened in a well-regulated family. Fancy damp wads left in one of her rag-bags, undiscovered for months, until they became nests for mice! But such accidents do happen sometimes, even to charming people, and at all events, the mice were important agents in this little drama. Unmolested through months, a time came when rag-bags were emptied; and who but Milly herself should put her hands upon the forgotten apron, and feel the little squeaking baby mouse inside the bundle?

THE PEARL RING

Let us drop the curtain over the scene that followed! But Martha's ring as well as the mouse dropped out in the scramble, and it was no wonder that Milly's sense of the fitness of things became a little melodramatic. Martha would certainly have preferred to introduce her friend to Cousin Jane in a more conventional manner; but, after all, what did anything signify when the blessed fact remained that her ring had returned to her? And Cousin Jane was not so much shocked as she might have been. There was a look in her face, as she watched the two girls, that seemed to have come from some far-away sweet land of youth.

Martha had a sudden intuition that somewhere in that bygone region was an forgotten girlish face that had once made sunshine in shady places.

At all events, nothing could be lovelier than her treatment of Milly—of the whole club, in fact—when the grand commotion had sub-

THE PEARL RING

sided to comparative calm. By some mysterious agency, which neither she nor Mrs. Redfield chose to explain, a charming little feast appeared, as if by magic, just at the right moment. There were ices that might have been molded after the fairy fruits in Aladdin's garden; and peaches that must have grown from the tree the little god Shinto planted; there were delicate cakes, too, of bewitching, incomprehensible flavors; and for each girl of that happy reading club a box of candy, whose ribbons were as ravishing outside as the sweets were delicious within. Add to this that Cousin Jane seemed to know just how to talk to them all; that she told them amusing experiences of her own "Kaffee-klatsches" in Germany, and ice carnivals in Russia, and grape-gatherings in Italy; and put them so much at their ease while she entertained them that every member of the club fell promptly in love with her, and went home breaking the tenth commandment

THE PEARL RING

hopelessly in their coveting of Martha's Cousin Jane.

"She's perfectly lovely!" was the unanimous cry when the club went to put on its hats and cloaks for a reluctant departure. "You are very welcome to your ring, Martha; but oh, we 'd like to steal your Cousin Jane!"

"Ah, no one could do that!" cried Martha, proudly. "She's too close to my heart."

And Cousin Jane heard the girlish chatter and knew it was sincere. In spite of her white hair and her sixty years (for these need not chill one's heart), a flush of pleasure rose to her withered face. Her summer at Newport with Mary Rutherford had been entirely satisfactory, Mary being still and always Cousin Jane's ideal of a "lily maid."

"But Martha has a sweet, wholesome nature," she thought, "and it is a pleasure to drop into such a rosebud garden of girls. First and last, I think I never made a better investment than that pearl ring!"

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0002120092A

